PATTERNS OF POWER

# The Seats They Fight Over

*Why the Small Group at the Top of Any Order Does Not Spend Its Energy Holding the Many Down — the Arrangement Does That by Itself — but Spends It Fighting Each Other for the Positions and Fighting Rival Powers Abroad, Why Its Awareness of What It Stands On Cools From the Founding Into Forgetfulness, and Why It Turns on Those Below It Mostly After They Have Already Risen and Been Put Down*

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with Claude (Anthropic)

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# A Note on This Collaboration

This study is one product of an ongoing collaboration, and the division of labour behind it is real enough to be worth stating, because neither half would have produced the work alone. The framework is Thomas J. Bryan's, and so is the correction this volume turns on. Against any picture of a ruling order steered, day to day, by a vigilant elite coordinating the oppression of the many, his point — offered as ever as a pattern he notices rather than a doctrine he asserts — is that the apex is small and real and not unaware, but that it does not have to run things, because the order runs itself; that this frees the small group at the top to spend its energy where its scarce problems actually are, fighting one another for the few commanding seats and fighting rival powers abroad; that the many below are, most of the time, a solved problem who barely enter the rulers' field of vision; and that the elite turns on those below it in a concerted way mainly after they have risen and been put down, converging then to re-engineer the arrangement so the danger will not recur. The research, the verification of every load-bearing date, figure, and named scholar against the record, and the prose are Claude's (Anthropic), developed in the same dialogue. Two choices shaped the volume at the author's direction: it is built around the circulation of the elite — the apex absorbed in its own contest — as its frame, with the reactive cycle of rising, repression, convergence, and reform-to-preserve as its climax; and it ends, like its companions, in a recognition rather than a remedy.

# The Argument in Eight Parts

**PART I · The Small Group at the Top** The structural fact that every order, whatever it calls itself, is run at its summit by a small minority, the scholars who made that fact a near-law, and the ordinary truth — visible in any large company — that a small apex sets the direction while the body of the thing runs without it

**PART II · Why the Apex Need Not Run Things** How an order reproduces itself below the apex without any direction from it, why this frees the small group at the top from the task one would expect to consume it, and what its actual scarce problem turns out to be

**PART III · The Circulation** How the contest for the few seats at the top consumes the energy of a ruling group, the two scholars who turned the everyday observation that there are never enough chairs into a theory of why orders break, and why the history of elites reads as one long quarrel among themselves

**PART IV · A House Devouring Itself** A ruling group so consumed by the contest for its own seats, and by the rival power at its gate, that it could spare almost no attention for the millions it ruled — who went on as before, and barely changed hands when the house finally fell

**PART V · The Awareness That Cools** That the ruling group is not blind to what holds it up, why its clear sight of the floor of force and the managed belief is sharpest at the founding and in regimes built on an explicit doctrine, and how that awareness fades, generation by generation, into the heir's fatal assumption that his standing is simply the order of nature

**PART VI · The Crash** The one thing that interrupts the ruling group's absorption in its own quarrels and turns its attention, briefly and as one, to the many below — and why a rising from below, once put down by the floor of force, is what forces a divided elite to remember its common interest

**PART VII · The Reform to Preserve** What a converged ruling group does after a rising has been crushed — re-engineer the arrangement so the danger cannot recur — the chancellor who paired the truncheon with the first welfare state to draw the workers away from revolution, and why the same reform can either widen the order or merely re-cage it, depending on a single condition

**PART VIII · The Seats They Fight Over** The whole account in one view, why seeing the ruling group as a small minority mostly absorbed in its own contest changes what one expects of it, and the recognition the volume ends on in place of a remedy

# Preface

This volume can be read by someone who has met neither the framework it belongs to nor any companion study. Every term is defined where it first appears; every case is described rather than merely named; and where it draws on a particular scholar, it says who they were and what they argued.

Its subject is the small group at the top of any large order, and its argument runs against the first thing suspicion supposes. Confronted with an order that favours some over many, one imagines a vigilant elite coordinating, day by day, the holding-down of the rest. This volume argues that the picture is almost exactly wrong. The apex is indeed small — the organised few always out-manoeuvre the disorganised many, which is the permanent finding of the study of elites — and it is not unaware of what holds it up. But it does not run the order day to day, because the order runs itself: the many below, each defending the position that rewards them, reproduce the whole arrangement without direction, so that the task of holding them down is mostly already done, by the arrangement rather than by the rulers.

Freed from that task, the small group spends its energy where its scarce problems actually lie — inward, in the ceaseless contest among its own members for the few commanding seats, and outward, against rival powers beyond the border. This is why the histories of the powerful read as one long quarrel among the powerful, with the many scarcely appearing. The volume follows that energy where it flows: through the theory of the circulation of elites and of their overproduction, through the example of a fabulously rich ruling house that devoured itself while its millions of subjects barely looked up, and through the cooling of the rulers' own awareness from the clarity of the founding into the heir's assumption that his standing is the order of nature.

Its climax is the one event that interrupts the elite's absorption in itself and turns it, briefly and as one, toward the many: a rising from below. The volume traces what follows — the floor of force used to crush the rising, the emergency converging the squabbling minority onto its common interest, and the reform conceded from above to ensure the danger does not recur — and shows why that reform either widens the order or merely re-cages the many, depending on whether they hold any centre of power the rulers do not own. It ends not in a remedy but in a recognition, because an order watched over by a distracted few and held up by a floor that needs no watching is changed, when it is changed at all, only in the brief violent intervals after it has already broken.

PART I

# The Small Group at the Top

*The structural fact that every order, whatever it calls itself, is run at its summit by a small minority, the scholars who made that fact a near-law, and the ordinary truth — visible in any large company — that a small apex sets the direction while the body of the thing runs without it*

## I. A Fact, Not an Accusation

Look at the top of any large order — a kingdom, a republic, an empire, a church, a party, a corporation — and you find the same thing: a small group makes the decisions that bind the whole. This is not a complaint and not a conspiracy; it is a structural regularity so consistent that the thinkers who first studied it treated it as something close to a law of social life. A handful of people hold the commanding positions, control the apparatus of the state or the firm, and decide the questions that matter, while the vast majority neither decides nor expects to. The point of this volume is not to be scandalised by that fact, which is plain, but to ask what the small group at the top actually spends its time and energy doing — because the answer is not what the suspicious imagination supposes, and getting it right changes the whole picture of how power works.

## II. The Organised Minority

The study of this small group has a name and a lineage. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries three thinkers — the Italians Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto and the German-Italian Robert Michels — founded what is now called elite theory, and their shared finding was blunt: in every society a small organised minority rules a large unorganised majority, and no change of regime abolishes the pattern. Mosca put it as the rule that the organised few will always defeat the disorganised many, because power is at bottom a matter of organisation, and a single coordinated group will always out-manoeuvre a mass that cannot coordinate. Michels, studying the socialist parties of his day — organisations founded expressly to abolish minority rule — concluded that they too inevitably grew a self-perpetuating leadership, and gave the finding its hardest formulation: whoever says organisation, says oligarchy. The lesson was not that this or that elite was wicked but that the existence of a small ruling group is a permanent feature of any large organised order, the disorganised many being structurally unable to rule themselves directly however much a constitution may say they do. It is worth noting that this tradition set itself explicitly against the expectation that the labouring majority would one day take power; it is, in that sense, the realist's account of rule rather than the revolutionary's.

## III. The Company That Runs Itself

The shape of the thing is visible in an institution everyone knows: the large modern corporation. A firm of a hundred thousand employees is directed by a small apex — a chief executive, a handful of officers, a board — and yet that apex does not, and could not, run the firm day to day. It does not approve each sale, schedule each shift, or answer each customer; the firm does all of that by itself, through the ordinary work of a hundred thousand people each doing the job their position rewards. What the apex does is narrower and higher: it sets direction, allocates the top resources, and decides who occupies the senior posts. The economists who first described this separation of those who own a great enterprise from the small group who actually control it caught a general truth about power, not only about commerce. The apex of a polity stands in the same relation to the polity as the board to the firm. It sets policy; it does not run the day. And because it does not have to run the day — because, as a companion study to this one argues at length, the body of the order reproduces itself without direction, on the position logic of everyone in it — the apex is freed to spend its energy on something else entirely. What that something else is, is the subject of this volume.

PART II

# Why the Apex Need Not Run Things

*How an order reproduces itself below the apex without any direction from it, why this frees the small group at the top from the task one would expect to consume it, and what its actual scarce problem turns out to be*

## I. The Body Below Runs on Its Own

The reason the apex need not run the day is that the order below it runs itself, and it does so by a mechanism worth restating plainly for anyone meeting it fresh. A society is held together not chiefly by commands from the top but by a great many people, each occupying a position — a clerk, a soldier, a teacher, a magistrate, a merchant — and each defending that position because it rewards them with a livelihood, a standing, a sphere of their own. They follow the rules not because they are watched but because following the rules is what their position pays, and because the values by which they judge were installed in them early enough to feel like simple truth rather than chosen allegiance. A million such people, each pursuing the reward of their own place, reproduce the whole order in aggregate without any of them intending the whole and without anyone at the centre directing them. The grain moves, the disputes are settled, the children are taught the national story, the taxes come in — and almost none of it requires an instruction from the apex, because the positions are arranged so that the people who fill them do these things in the course of seeking their own advantage.

## II. The Task That Is Already Done

This means that the task one might expect to consume a ruling group — keeping the many obedient — is, most of the time, already done, and done by the arrangement rather than by the rulers. The apex does not have to spend its days suppressing the population, because the population is not, most of the time, in revolt or anywhere near it; it is going to work, paying its dues, raising its children inside the order it was born into and takes for the shape of the world. The floor of force on which the whole rests is real, and the apex knows it is there, but it is mostly held in reserve, unneeded, because belief and habit and position have made obedience the path of least resistance for nearly everyone nearly all the time. An apex freed from the daily work of compulsion is an apex with its energy available for other things — and a group with power and energy to spare does not let them lie idle.

## III. The Scarce Thing Is Higher Up

So what is the small group's actual scarce problem? Not obedience from below, which the arrangement supplies. The scarce thing is higher up: it is the positions at the top themselves, which are few, and which more people want than can have. The apex is not a settled, harmonious club serenely administering its dominance; it is a crowd of ambitious people contending for a small number of commanding seats, and the contention among them — not the management of the masses — is what consumes most of their attention, most of the time. The remainder goes outward, to the struggle with rival powers beyond the order's borders, other apexes contending for the same kind of dominance over their own domains and against each other. Inward against rivals for the seats, outward against rival powers: this is where the energy of a ruling group actually goes. The many below are, structurally, a solved problem most of the time. The few above, and the few across the border, are the unsolved ones. The rest of this volume follows the energy where it actually flows.

PART III

# The Circulation

*How the contest for the few seats at the top consumes the energy of a ruling group, the two scholars who turned the everyday observation that there are never enough chairs into a theory of why orders break, and why the history of elites reads as one long quarrel among themselves*

## I. The Fight Is Mostly Internal

The dominant fact about a ruling group, once one stops imagining it as a coordinated machine for oppression and looks at what it actually does, is that it fights with itself. The seats of real power are few; the people qualified and hungry for them are many; and the gap between the two is filled with intrigue, faction, alliance, betrayal, and the slow or sudden replacement of those who hold the seats by those who want them. Vilfredo Pareto, one of the founders of the study of elites, named the permanent version of this the circulation of elites: an established minority defends its predominance while a newer, hungrier minority presses to take its place, and the second either fuses with the first or dethrones it — but either way the personnel at the top are forever turning over while the fact of rule by a small group never changes. The faces change; the apex remains. The energy that an outside observer might expect to be aimed downward, at the many, is aimed mostly sideways, at each other.

## II. Too Many for the Chairs

The modern theorists Peter Turchin and Jack Goldstone gave this its sharpest mechanism, in what they call elite overproduction. Picture, they say, a game of musical chairs: there are only so many positions of real power and wealth, and when a society produces aspirants to those positions faster than the positions themselves multiply — more contenders than chairs — the surplus does not quietly disappear. The thwarted aspirants compete harder, break the informal rules that once kept elite rivalry civil, and, crucially, some of them turn into counter-elites: able and ambitious people, blocked from the inside, who build rival coalitions and, to win, mobilise discontent from below against the incumbents. Goldstone traced this pattern through the great breakdowns of early-modern England, France, Russia, and China, and Turchin argues it is among the most reliable warning signs of a coming crisis: not poverty at the bottom alone, but a glut of frustrated would-be rulers at the top, fighting over a number of seats that has not grown to match them. The fight for the chairs, when the chairs run short, is what tears an order apart — and it is a fight among the elite, not between elite and mass.

## III. Why Elite History Reads as a Family Quarrel

This is why the political histories of the powerful read, overwhelmingly, as accounts of the powerful fighting one another. Open the chronicle of almost any dynasty or republic and what fills the pages is succession disputes, court intrigues, assassinations, coups, civil wars among great families, the rise and fall of factions — and the mass of the population scarcely appears, except as a backdrop or a resource the contending factions try to mobilise. This is not because the chroniclers were snobs who ignored the people, though some were. It is because the action genuinely was at the top: the many were on autopilot, reproducing the order through their own position logic, while the few expended themselves in the contest for the seats. An order can run for generations with its ruling group almost entirely absorbed in fighting itself, precisely because the part of the system that holds the many in place needs so little tending. The quarrel at the top is loud and bloody and fills the record; the quiet machine below, holding everything up, is invisible exactly because it never stops working.

PART IV

# A House Devouring Itself

*A ruling group so consumed by the contest for its own seats, and by the rival power at its gate, that it could spare almost no attention for the millions it ruled — who went on as before, and barely changed hands when the house finally fell*

## I. The Richest Apex in the World, Eating Itself

The clearest single illustration of a ruling group fighting itself rather than its subjects is the Persian empire of the Achaemenids in its last decades, on the eve of Alexander — because it was, at the time, perhaps the wealthiest and most powerful order on earth, and it spent its final energies in murder at the top while the millions below carried on. In the years before the Macedonian invasion the Persian court was a slaughterhouse of ambition. A court official named Bagoas, having grown powerful, poisoned the reigning king Artaxerxes III together with most of his sons; placed a surviving son, Arses, on the throne; poisoned him too when he showed independence; killed many other princes of the royal house; and finally installed a distant relative as Darius III — who, discovering that Bagoas meant to poison him as well, forced the poisoner to drink his own cup. This was the condition of the apex: not coordinating the oppression of its subjects, but devouring its own members in the contest for the supreme seat. And behind the court intrigue ran a long history of the same thing at the next level down — satraps revolting against the centre, a royal prince hiring a Greek mercenary army to seize the throne from his brother, provinces lost and reconquered — the whole ruling stratum perpetually at war with itself over who would hold which position.

## II. The Rival at the Gate

The other claim on the apex's energy was the rival apex beyond the border, and here too the Persian case is exact. While the court poisoned itself, a rival power was rising in Macedon, and when Alexander invaded, Darius III at first did not even take the field himself but left his satraps to deal with the threat, as though the defence of the empire were one more provincial matter. When the Persian apex did turn to fight, it fought as a divided thing: after the defeats, Darius was betrayed and murdered not by Alexander but by his own satrap Bessus, who seized the royal title for himself before fleeing. The empire's energy, to the very end, went inward against rivals for the seats and outward against the rival power — never, in any sustained way, downward against the subjects, who were not in revolt and required no suppressing.

## III. The Many Barely Noticed

And what of those subjects, the millions across the vast empire? They stayed, overwhelmingly, exactly where they were. The conquest that destroyed the Achaemenid dynasty changed the apex and left the body of the order standing: Alexander, having taken the great accumulated treasuries and defeated the royal armies, largely kept the existing Persian administrative structure, governing through the same apparatus and many of the same officials, so much so that some historians half-seriously call him the last of the Achaemenid kings. For the farmer in a Persian province, the cataclysm at the top — the poisonings, the battles, the fall of a three-century dynasty — registered as a change in the distant name to which taxes were owed, not as a change in his position, his work, or his world. The apex had fought itself to death and been replaced by a foreign apex, and the self-running body of the order absorbed the shock and carried on. This is the whole thesis in one case: a ruling group spends itself on the seats and the rivals; the many are a solved problem who barely look up; and even the violent destruction of the apex passes over the body of the order like weather over a field that is ploughed, regardless, the following spring.

PART V

# The Awareness That Cools

*That the ruling group is not blind to what holds it up, why its clear sight of the floor of force and the managed belief is sharpest at the founding and in regimes built on an explicit doctrine, and how that awareness fades, generation by generation, into the heir's fatal assumption that his standing is simply the order of nature*

## I. They Are Not Blind

Nothing in the previous parts should suggest that the people at the top do not know what they are standing on. They mostly do. A ruling group is generally aware, in some practical register, that its authority rests on a managed belief laid over a floor of force — that the many obey because they have been formed to think the order legitimate, and that behind the legitimacy stands the capacity to compel. The clearest proof is the regime built openly on a doctrine: a revolutionary government that seizes power in the name of an explicit creed knows exactly that it must manage what people believe, and says so — it builds an apparatus to propagate the doctrine, names its enemies, and makes no secret that a coercive power stands ready behind the persuasion. Such a regime is an apex at the peak of self-awareness, because it had to construct its legitimating belief deliberately and recently, and remembers doing it. The founder of any order is in the same condition: he knows the arrangement is an arrangement, because he made it, and he knows what it is for.

## II. The Cooling

But awareness of this kind does not hold its temperature across generations, and its cooling is one of the most consequential things that happens to a ruling group over time. The founder knows he set the furniture; his great-grandchildren, born into the finished room, do not. The heirs of a long-established order inherit their positions as a birthright, encounter the legitimating belief as simple truth rather than as a managed instrument, and come to take their own standing for a fact of nature rather than the output of an arrangement that has to be maintained. The fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun described exactly this decay: the founders of a ruling house are bound together by the hard solidarity forged in the struggle that won them power, but their descendants, raised in the security and luxury that power brought, lose that solidarity, take the arrangement for granted, and grow careless of the things that actually hold it up — until the house, hollowed by its own forgetting, falls to some hungrier group that still possesses what the

founders had. The awareness that was hot at the founding cools, generation by generation, toward the complacency of heirs who think the order keeps itself.

## III. The Conscious Act That Becomes the Furniture

The cooling is visible whenever one can watch a deliberate act of the powerful harden, over time, into the unquestioned furniture of a people. When William of Normandy conquered England, he knew precisely that he was imposing an arrangement on a conquered country: he dispossessed the native aristocracy, installed his own followers in their lands, and ordered a survey of everything he now owned so thorough that later generations likened it to a doomsday reckoning. When Henry the Eighth broke the English church from Rome and seized the monasteries, he knew he was re-laying the furniture of the realm for his own reasons of money and power. These were conscious acts by men who understood them as acts. And yet, generations later, the Norman settlement and the English church had become simply what England was — the unquestioned furniture of English identity, experienced by those who lived in it not as the residue of a conqueror's calculation or a king's divorce but as the natural shape of their nation. The same hardening can be seen wherever an order was founded on a deliberate settlement and then ran on: once the founding text is written and the tax it commands is collected and the rite it ordains is performed each year, once the constitution is ratified and the elections it prescribes are held, the arrangement passes out of the realm of things consciously chosen and into the realm of things that simply are, defended by people who no longer see that anyone ever chose them. The danger in the cooling is precisely this: the apex that has forgotten its order is an arrangement is the apex that stops maintaining it, mistakes the belief on top for the foundation, and makes the careless error that begins the fall.

PART VI

# The Crash

*The one thing that interrupts the ruling group's absorption in its own quarrels and turns its attention, briefly and as one, to the many below — and why a rising from below, once put down by the floor of force, is what forces a divided elite to remember its common interest*

## I. What Makes the Quarrel Stop

If the ruling group spends its energy fighting over the seats and against rival powers, and treats the many below as a solved problem, then something unusual must happen for it to turn its attention downward — and the something is a crash. Most of the time the many stay in their positions and the apex need not think about them. But occasionally the arrangement fails at the base: a tax becomes unbearable, a famine breaks the bargain, a belief loses its hold, a local injustice catches and spreads, and the many who were on autopilot rise. A rising from below is the one event that can interrupt the elite's absorption in its own quarrels, because it threatens not this faction or that but the whole order on which every faction's seat depends. The squabbling minority, which a moment before was wholly occupied with fighting itself, is reminded all at once that it has a common interest more fundamental than the contest for the seats: the survival of the arrangement that makes the seats worth having.

## II. The Floor Does Its Work First

The first response to a rising is not reform but force, and this is where the floor of violence — held in reserve through all the long stretches when belief and habit sufficed — is finally used. The rising is put down: the monopoly of organised force that the apex commands is brought to bear, the rebellion is crushed, its leaders killed or scattered, its example made terrible enough to deter the next. This is the brute foundation showing itself, the thing the managed belief normally keeps decently out of sight. And it usually works in the narrow sense — risings from below, against a state that retains its monopoly of force and the will to use it, are far more often crushed than victorious. But crushing the rising does not, by itself, repair the arrangement that produced it. The grievance that drove the many to rise is still there; the failure at the base that let the pressure build is still there; and a ruling group with any sense knows that force alone, applied again and again to a recurring rising, is the expensive, brittle way to hold an order — the warlord's way, not the way of an order that runs itself. So the crash sets up a second moment, after the violence, which is the one this volume has been building toward.

## III. The Convergence

For the emergency does something to the ruling group that nothing in its ordinary life can do: it makes the fractious minority converge. The faction-fighting that consumes the apex in normal times is a luxury of security; let the whole arrangement be genuinely threatened, and the contending factions discover, with sudden clarity, that they would all rather keep the order — and their respective seats within it — than risk losing everything to a victorious rising or a rival's exploitation of the chaos. The competition for the chairs is suspended; the common interest in the existence of the chairs reasserts itself. And so, the rising once crushed, the converged elite does the thing it almost never does in calm times: it sits down, together, and turns its attention deliberately to the many — not to oppress them in the ordinary sense, which the arrangement handled by itself, but to re-engineer the arrangement so that the rising cannot happen again. The crash is the convergence-forcing event. What the converged elite does next is the climax of the whole account.

PART VII

# The Reform to Preserve

*What a converged ruling group does after a rising has been crushed — re-engineer the arrangement so the danger cannot recur — the chancellor who paired the truncheon with the first welfare state to draw the workers away from revolution, and why the same reform can either widen the order or merely re-cage it, depending on a single condition*

## I. Reform From Above

The thing a converged elite does, after the floor of force has crushed a rising, is reform — but reform of a particular kind, aimed at a particular end. It is reform from above, designed not to redistribute power to the many but to remove the grievance that drove them to rise, so that the arrangement can go on holding them without recurring crises. The Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci gave this manoeuvre a name, the passive revolution: change conceded from the top precisely in order to forestall change demanded from below, the order renovating itself just enough to survive the pressure that would otherwise break it. It is the ruling group acting, for once, as the coordinated thing the suspicious imagination always pictured — but acting reactively, after the emergency, and in the service of preservation rather than oppression as such.

## II. The Truncheon and the Pension

The textbook case is the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and it shows the manoeuvre with unusual clarity because he performed both halves of it in plain sight. Faced in the 1870s with a rising socialist movement that frightened the propertied order, Bismarck first reached for the floor of force: the Anti-Socialist Law of 1878 banned socialist associations, meetings, and newspapers, the truncheon brought down on the organised threat. But Bismarck understood that repression alone would not hold, and so he did the second thing — he set out, in his own words, to win the workers away from their party by giving them what the party promised. In the 1880s he created the world's first modern system of social insurance: sickness insurance in 1883, accident insurance in 1884, old-age and disability pensions in 1889. The truncheon and the pension were a single strategy: crush the organised threat, then remove the grievance that fed it, so that the worker would look to the existing order rather than to its overthrow for the easing of his lot. It was reform, real and consequential reform, undertaken to preserve the very arrangement the socialists meant to end.

## III. Why It Cuts Two Ways

But the reform-to-preserve does not always do what the elite intends, and the honest account must say so. Bismarck's gambit failed at its own goal: the social insurance did not wean the workers from their party, which kept growing until it was the largest in the German parliament within a generation. Sometimes the reactive reform succeeds in defusing the pressure — the decades of redistribution in the mid-twentieth-century United States are read by some as exactly such a successful defusing, the elite conceding enough to drain the danger. Sometimes it fails. And there is a deeper fork still, which connects this volume to the larger inquiry it belongs to. The reform a converged elite concedes to preserve itself can become, despite its defensive intent, a genuine widening of the order — a concession the many seize and keep and build on, so that the arrangement made to re-cage them in fact enlarges their place in it. Or it can remain a hollow gesture, a cosmetic adjustment that changes nothing real while the floor of force does the actual work. Which of the two it becomes is decided by a single condition: whether the society holds centres of power the rulers do not own — independent courts, a free press, an organised body of the excluded with the standing to bargain. Where it does, the defensive reform tends to become a real concession, because the many have the leverage to hold the elite to it and to press for the next; the franchise that began as a sliver widens, over generations, not from the generosity of the powerful but because each crushed rising forced a converging elite to concede a little more to preserve the rest, and each concession, once made in a society with teeth, could not be taken back. Where such centres have been foreclosed, the same reform stays cosmetic, and the cycle of grievance, rising, repression, and hollow renovation simply repeats. The reform to preserve is the hinge, and plurality is what decides which way it turns.

PART VIII

# The Seats They Fight Over

*The whole account in one view, why seeing the ruling group as a small minority mostly absorbed in its own contest changes what one expects of it, and the recognition the volume ends on in place of a remedy*

## I. The Whole Account

Set the pieces together. Every large order is run at its summit by a small minority, because the organised few will always out-manoeuvre the disorganised many; this is the permanent finding of the study of elites, true of kingdoms and republics and parties and firms alike. That minority does not run the order day to day, because the order runs itself: the many below, each defending the position that rewards them, reproduce the whole arrangement without direction, so the task of holding them down is mostly done already, by the arrangement rather than by the rulers. Freed from that task, the apex spends its energy where its scarce problems actually lie — inward, in the contest among themselves for the few commanding seats, the circulation of an old minority and a new one forever fighting to hold or take the chairs; and outward, against the rival powers beyond the border. This is why the histories of the powerful read as one long quarrel among the powerful, the many scarcely appearing. The apex knows, more or less, what holds it up — a managed belief over a floor of force — but that knowledge is hot only at the founding and in regimes built on an explicit doctrine, and cools, generation by generation, into the heir's assumption that his standing is the order of nature, which is the assumption that begins the fall. And the many below enter the apex's field of vision in a sustained way only when they rise — at which point the floor of force is used to crush them, and the emergency, by reminding the squabbling elite of its common interest, converges it long enough to re-engineer the arrangement so the rising will not recur; a reform that widens the order where the many have the leverage to hold the elite to it, and merely re-cages them where they do not.

## II. What Changes When You See It This Way

Seeing the ruling group this way changes what one expects of it, and the change cuts against the reflexes of both the cynic and the trusting. Against the cynic: there is no serene cabal coordinating the daily oppression of the many, because the apex is neither serene nor mostly aimed at the many — it is a crowd of rivals absorbed in fighting one another for the seats, and the many are held in place not by the elite's attention but by the arrangement's own momentum. The conspiracy the cynic looks for is mostly a civil war he has mistaken for a committee. But against the trusting, equally: the absence of a coordinating cabal

does not mean the order is fair or freely chosen, for the same minority that ignores the many in normal times will converge with sudden unanimity to crush and then to manage them the moment they rise, and the reform it then concedes is calculated, however real its effects, to preserve the minority's place. The order is held by a small group that fights itself over the seats and turns on the many chiefly in reaction — and that is neither the benign self-government the trusting imagine nor the steady conspiracy the cynic fears, but a third thing, colder than either: an arrangement that mostly runs itself, watched over by a distracted few who attend to it only when it breaks.

### III. The Seats They Fight Over

So the volume ends, as its companions do, in a recognition rather than a remedy, because to prescribe the arrangement that would set things right would be to claim a destination, and the claim of a destination is the move this body of work exists to distrust. The recognition is this. The seats at the top are few, and they are fought over without end, by an organised minority for whom the contest among themselves is the great absorbing business of life. Below them, the floor holds — the many in their positions, reproducing the order through the pursuit of their own livelihoods, needing and receiving almost none of the apex's attention. And the floor holds without anyone watching it, year upon year, generation upon generation, while the few above are wholly taken up with the chairs — until the floor gives, somewhere, and the many rise, and for one sharp interval the whole quarrelling minority turns as one to look down: to crush the rising with the force it normally keeps hidden, and then to reach down and adjust the arrangement so the floor will hold again. And then, the danger past, the minority turns back to what it was always doing, what it will be doing when the next crash comes and the one after that — fighting, among themselves, over the seats. To see that clearly is to understand both why such an order is so stable, held up by a self-running floor that asks nothing of its distracted masters, and why it is so hard to change: not because a vigilant elite defends it, but because the elite is barely watching, the floor holds itself, and the only moments when the arrangement is open to being remade are the brief, violent intervals after it has already broken — when the many have risen, and been put down, and the converged few are deciding, for their own preservation, how much to concede.

## A Note on Sources

This volume verified its load-bearing specifics against the scholarship rather than asserting them from memory, and a reader who wishes to go further should go to the following.

On the rule of the organised minority, the founders of elite theory — Gaetano Mosca on the ‘ruling class’ or ‘political class,’ Vilfredo Pareto on the ‘circulation of elites,’ and Robert Michels on the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ — and, for the separation of those who own a great enterprise from the small group who control it, Berle and Means on the modern corporation. On why a glut of aspirants for too few positions destabilises an order, the structural-demographic theory of Peter Turchin and the historical work of Jack Goldstone on elite overproduction and state breakdown in early-modern England, France, Russia, and China. On the self-devouring of a ruling house, the accounts of the late Achaemenid court — the poisonings attributed to the official Bagoas, the satrapal revolts, and Alexander’s retention of the Persian administration after the conquest. On the cooling of awareness across generations, Ibn Khaldun’s Muqaddimah and his concept of asabiyyah. On reform conceded from above to forestall revolution, Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the ‘passive revolution’ and the case of Otto von Bismarck, who paired the

Anti-Socialist Law of 1878 with the first modern social insurance — sickness in 1883, accident in 1884, old age in 1889 — expressly to draw the workers away from socialism, a gambit whose political goal it failed to achieve. The framework and method are stated in this project's companion papers — on position logic, on how an order runs without a driver, and on how durable orders are set in place and come to run themselves — each written, like this one, to stand alone.